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A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE PARK PLAZA URBAN RENEWAL PROJECT

November 1, 1978

INTRODUCTION

The Park Plaza Civic Advisory Committee (CAC) is a council of fourteen civic and business organizations established in May 1973 to serve as an advisory group to the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) and to assure citizen participation in the planning of the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Project, as required by law. For sixteen months CAC operated without funding, but in late 1974, BRA and the Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs provided the Committee with an annual budget and in March 1975, requested it to develop criteria for BRA's consideration in preparing the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and a revised development plan.

In September 1975, CAC published for distribution at four business and neighborhood meetings an Interim Report reviewing the history of Park Plaza and setting forth many of the Committee's recommendations. During the three years following these meetings and report, CAC has continued to monitor the project's planning. It seems an appropriate time to issue a further report, briefly reviewing recent developments, present status of the project, and the role of the CAC.

PRESENT STATUS

The scale and density of the original large-scale proposal have been significantly reduced, and city and state approvals of the revised plan have been obtained. The state has broken ground for a new state transportation building to be located between New Charles Street, Stuart Street and Tremont Street. A tentative developer has been designated by the BRA Board for a luxury hotel on the site at Boylston and New Charles Streets. The remaining three sites within the current project have no firm developers at this time.

BACKGROUND

The Park Plaza project was conceived in two stages--the first embracing the area bounded by Arlington, Boylston, Tremont, and Stuart Streets; the second

extending from Tremont and Boylston Streets to the edge of Chinatown and including much of the so-called Combat Zone. Thus far only Stage One has been subject to environmental study and formal planning. (See Figures 1 and 2 at the end of this report.)

Following the citizen meetings in September 1975, CAC submitted twenty-nine development recommendations, or criteria, and in January and March 1976, prepared for the State Office of Environmental Affairs analyses of the BRA's draft EIR. After many months of further discussion and study, BRA presented its final report to the state including a substantial number of CAC's recommendations. The Department of Community Affairs with the advice of the Office of Environmental Affairs granted final state approval of the Plan on November 23, 1976.

The amended plan reduced the density of the project from 5.8 million square feet and five towers to 2.3 million square feet and one tower, allowed for an auto-free plaza, and retained a number of buildings east of Charles Street previously designated for destruction. Most significant, it included the proposed State Transportation Building along Stuart and New Charles Streets to be developed by the Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC.) This building made it possible in the judgment of the BRA to reduce the project's size and density while retaining its economic feasibility.

In view of the substantial changes in the project since the City Council's approval in 1971, BRA returned the amended plan to the Council in June 1977. Following several hearings, the Council unanimously approved the "new" plan in December 1977, granting the last official sanction to the project after seven years of controversy.

PHASE ONE
DESCRIPTION

State Transportation Building

The State Transportation Building, a structure of approximately 870,000 square feet, extends in an "L" shape along Stuart and New Charles Streets and is well below the prescribed height limit of 145 feet. (See Figures 2 and 3.) Consistent with CAC's recommendation that the project include 18-hour-a-day mixed use activities, the EOTC plans include 58,000 square feet of ground-floor space containing a variety of restaurants and retail outlets gathered around an eight-story glass-enclosed atrium. Other features of the building include a pedestrian way

from Boylston to Warrenton Street through the atrium, a renovated Boylston Place, possibly a day-care center for employees, and a 330-car garage, 200 spaces of which will be available to the public in the evening. As requested by the CAC, the remaining parcels east of Charles Street, including the Saxon Theater, Number Two Park Square, the Little and Colonial Buildings, Piano Row, and abutters on Boylston Place, will not be demolished.

CAC has continued to monitor the plans for the State Transportation Building as they have evolved during the past year and to meet regularly with the project architect, Goody & Clancy Associates, Inc., and representatives of EOTC. The Legislature approved funding for the building in July of this year and demolition began this summer. Construction of the foundations will begin in spring of 1979.

A further requirement of the CAC was "an agreement by the Legislature to make in-lieu-of tax payments to the City which would at least cover the costs of provision of all municipal services, and which are not less than the tax revenue which the site would provide under current assessment multiplied by each future tax rate." Mayor White in a letter to CAC in January 1976, expressed confidence that "an agreement can be reached which is satisfactory to all parties." [A final arrangement, however, has yet to be concluded.]

Parcels West of Charles Street

In December 1977, with final city approval imminent, the designated developer of the remaining portions of Park Plaza, Boston Urban Associates, withdrew from the project. BRA promptly prepared a developer's kit and in March 1978, readvertised the remaining parcels. Despite the further delay involved, the new circumstances relieve several serious concerns. They set aside the financial arrangement between Boston Urban Associates and the city, which had given the developer unusual concessions to compensate for the reduction in the project's size. In addition, they open the possibility of separate proposals for each parcel, improving the project's feasibility and making its timetable more flexible. Although development of some parcels may still be slow, it will no longer be tied to a sequential schedule over some eight to ten years or clouded by doubts as to the developer's willingness to fulfill his commitments.

In July of this year, the BRA Board designated the Boston Plaza Hotel Associates as the tentative developer for the hotel site between New Charles Street and Hadassah Way fronting on Boylston Street. (The "Hadassah/Charles Sub-Parcel, Figure 1.) The group has submitted preliminary plans for a 393-room luxury hotel to be constructed by George B. H. Macomber Company of Boston and operated by Lex Hotels. Architects are John C. Warnecke & Associates, New York, and Desmond & Lord, Boston. Despite the high land costs involved, the plans appear realistic, well-financed, and generally conformant to the criteria set by CAC and the Environmental Impact Report. The Associates have agreed to submit within six months a letter of intent, design development drawings, and outline specifications. Corollary steps include acquisition of the land, execution of a 121-A agreement, and commencement of the public elements such as street and utility relocation. CAC has approved the tentative designation of Plaza Hotel Associates and will continue to review the project plans as they develop.

Arlington-Hadassah Block

Under the agreement with the former developer, renewal of the Arlington-Hadassah block (see Figure 1) was scheduled for five to seven years after approval of the project with no option of rehabilitation. CAC believed this decision placed an unconscionable burden on the owners and tenants and encouraged further blight of the area. It urged the BRA and the state to require development within eighteen months or to eliminate this block from the plan, thus allowing for alternative solutions. With the withdrawal of Boston Urban Associates, the opportunity is now open to proceed with renewal, rehabilitation, or a combination of the two. BRA is hopeful that construction of the hotel and street improvements will make investment in the Arlington-Hadassah block, as well as in the remaining parcels, so attractive as to insure their development within the next few years. Already inquiries have been received by the BRA from prospective developers.

Traffic Circulation

A principal concern of CAC has been the establishment throughout the Park Plaza project area and the Theater District of a coherent system of pedestrian circulation. Among other recommendations to this

end, the Committee suggested the elimination of New Providence Street and construction of an auto-free zone at the project's center. The BRA Design Staff accepted the proposal and in 1976 engaged Barton-Aschman Associates to evaluate various "roadway alternatives designed to handle the relocated traffic flow." After more than a year of work by the consultant, CAC and BRA staff, an alternative was selected and approved.

As currently planned, Stuart Street will operate much as it does today but be rebuilt to accommodate traffic more efficiently between Washington and Arlington Streets. Charles Street will be realigned (as New Charles Street) and carry four lanes of traffic from Stuart to Boylston Street. Boylston Street will become two-way along the Public Garden but reversed "English-style." Sidewalks on either side of Boylston will be widened substantially to allow tree planting and pedestrian street furniture.

CAC's Transportation Committee prepared detailed recommendations for the circulation plan which were approved by the full Committee and transmitted to BRA in May 1978. As general criteria, these proposals were based on existing capacity of the present street system but designed to provide a more orderly traffic flow, to maximize pedestrian access, safety, and amenities, to enhance Stuart Street, and within these requirements to facilitate good access and servicing for both new and existing development.

BRA's consultant firm, Universal Engineering, is currently preparing master plans for the public improvements, including the relocation of utilities and the first phase of street construction. The city submitted preliminary plans for this first phase of work to the Massachusetts Department of Public Works in July for approval of funding by the Federal Highway Administration under the Urban Systems program. CAC has monitored the development of these detailed plans to ensure that they reflect the Committee's recommendations. It will continue to do so throughout the design and implementation phases.

Height Controls

In 1977, the Zoning Commission approved a BRA petition, based on CAC recommendations, to establish height controls and rescind the floor-area-ratio bonus provisions for buildings within 100 feet of streets abutting the Common and Public Garden.

The only parcel exempted from the new limits was the Arlington Street Church land presently zoned for 155 feet, consideration of which was deferred to a later meeting. Heights along Boylston Street are generally consistent with those set for the amended Park Plaza Plan, while limits for the remaining streets around the two parks reflect the average of existing tall buildings.

Uses

In light of modifications in the Park Plaza Plan and altered economic conditions, CAC in 1976 commissioned Daniel J. Ahern and Helene Johnson to prepare a study on possible cultural uses as opposed to the preponderant emphasis on retail development previously envisaged for Park Plaza. On the basis of that study, Downtown as an Arts Center, the Committee forwarded a series of recommendations to BRA, many of which, as noted in various places in this report, have been implemented or are now under consideration.

PARK PLAZA - PHASE TWO

Soon after its formation in 1973, CAC recommended that Phase Two with its stress on large-scale renewal be abandoned and replaced with a more realistic and comprehensive program emphasizing rehabilitation. Although the CAC recommendation was not adopted, little action, in fact, occurred for several years other than the construction of Liberty Tree Park and amendment of the zoning code to provide a cordon sanitaire around the Combat Zone by the introduction of a limited "adult entertainment district."

More recently interest in these parcels has quickened and, as long hoped, plans now interlace with those for the Theater District and other contiguous areas. BRA recently published a study entitled Lower Washington Street Area which explores various alternative proposals and outlines basic planning and land use objectives for the blocks bounded by Tremont, Stuart, Washington, and Avery Streets. Major components of the program include expansion of the Chinese community along Washington Street and construction of new housing. Attention is also given to the possible conversion of several Washington Street theaters into centers for the performing arts and the restructuring of their historic link to the Theater District. Within this program, private development of parcels delineated by the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Plan remains a possibility, but in its general planning policy BRA

has noted that "No longer is wholesale clearance an option." CAC believes the general approach set forth in the study forms a reasonable and encouraging step toward the area's revitalization.

THEATER DISTRICT

In its report on cultural uses, CAC recommended that high priority be given to the preservation and enhancement of the Theater District including the upgrading of its physical environment. A program to effect such physical improvements is now underway as part of the Urban Systems contract for Park Plaza and will include new pedestrian ways, park facilities, light fixtures, signage, and informational kiosks.

Of primary importance are efforts to restore and preserve the theaters themselves. The Metropolitan Center, Inc. has developed plans and raised a portion of the funds needed to convert the Music Hall into a facility able to accomodate large opera and ballet companies. Public meetings and newspaper articles have also stimulated wide interest in "saving" the Wilbur, scheduled for abandonment by the present leaseholders in 1979.

Plans for the State Transportation Building not only call for retention of the Saxon Theater but allow substantial space for enlargement of its stage area. CAC has long urged that the Opera Company of Boston be encouraged to locate in the Theater District, and it is hoped that a refurbished Saxon may provide an appropriate home for the Company organization.

Construction of an attractive pedestrian way through Boylston Place to Warrenton Street and the introduction of restaurants and other amenities on the ground floor of the State Transportation Building may give further impetus to the District's revival. Finally, the city has recently engaged an architect to prepare proposals for the general enhancement of the District as well as specific plans for one site.

These steps reflect thoughtful and imaginative planning by city and state agencies. Much credit belongs to various private groups and individuals, including the late Daniel J. Ahern, perhaps the District's most perceptive and articulate champion, the Metropolitan Center, for its vital effort to expand the Music Hall, and the City Conservation League, whose meticulous research has drawn public attention to the value and significance of the District's architecture.

Prospects for a renascent Theater District are undoubtedly brighter, yet at the bottom line its survival remains conjectural. Both the Music Hall and the Wilbur are owned by Tufts University, and their future will depend in part on that institution's support of public and private efforts aimed at insuring their viability. Another essential ingredient will be the equitable resolution of tax problems facing these and other commercial theaters.

On the development side, reversion to wholesale clearance in neighboring blocks or thoughtless construction of large-scale public buildings could alter fatally the area's character and scale. Inertia, on the other hand, will insure the District's rapid deterioration. The theaters are an endangered species, and the time for their rescue is disturbingly short. CAC will continue, accordingly, to press for enactment of prompt and feasible programs designed to enhance and strengthen the District without sacrifice of its cultural and architectural integrity or damage to nearby residential communities.

ROLE OF CAC

What began in 1973 as virtually an adversary role has developed for CAC into a successful working relationship with BRA and concerned state agencies. If CAC in this report assumes credit for presenting various ideas, it is the BRA and EOTC staffs and associated architects that have translated them into workable plans. CAC has been fortunate, too, in the valued assistance of its planning consultants, Justin Gray Associates (especially Ellen Feingold) and more recently Dean Johnson.

Citizen participation in the Park Plaza project, for all its inherent difficulties, has clearly worked and is helping to bring about a development more feasible and appropriate than originally planned as well as more compatible with the surrounding public parks and residential neighborhoods. Hopefully the process of community involvement developed in Park Plaza will serve as a prototype for other urban renewal projects, speeding their realization and facilitating their public acceptance.

As Park Plaza moves into implementation, CAC will continue in its role of review and oversight as a citizen advisory committee. In this capacity CAC will identify and evaluate community responses to the planning and design of the project elements, review the BRA Work Program including deferred portions of the EIR, and monitor the environmental and design review processes. CAC meetings are open to the public, and the Committee welcomes at all times views and comments on the plans.

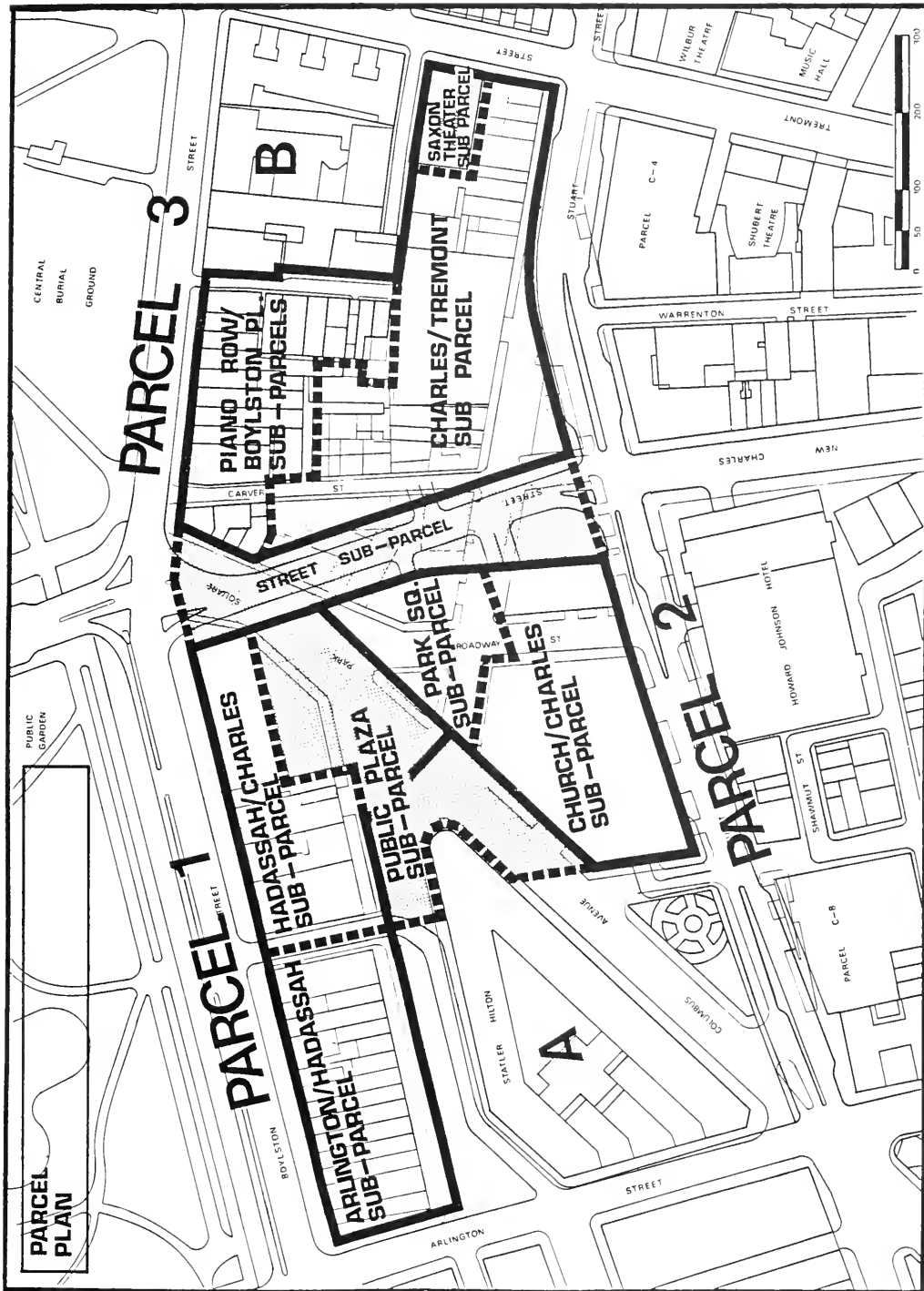


Fig. 1. PARK PLAZA URBAN RENEWAL PLAN: PHASE ONE PARCEL PLAN

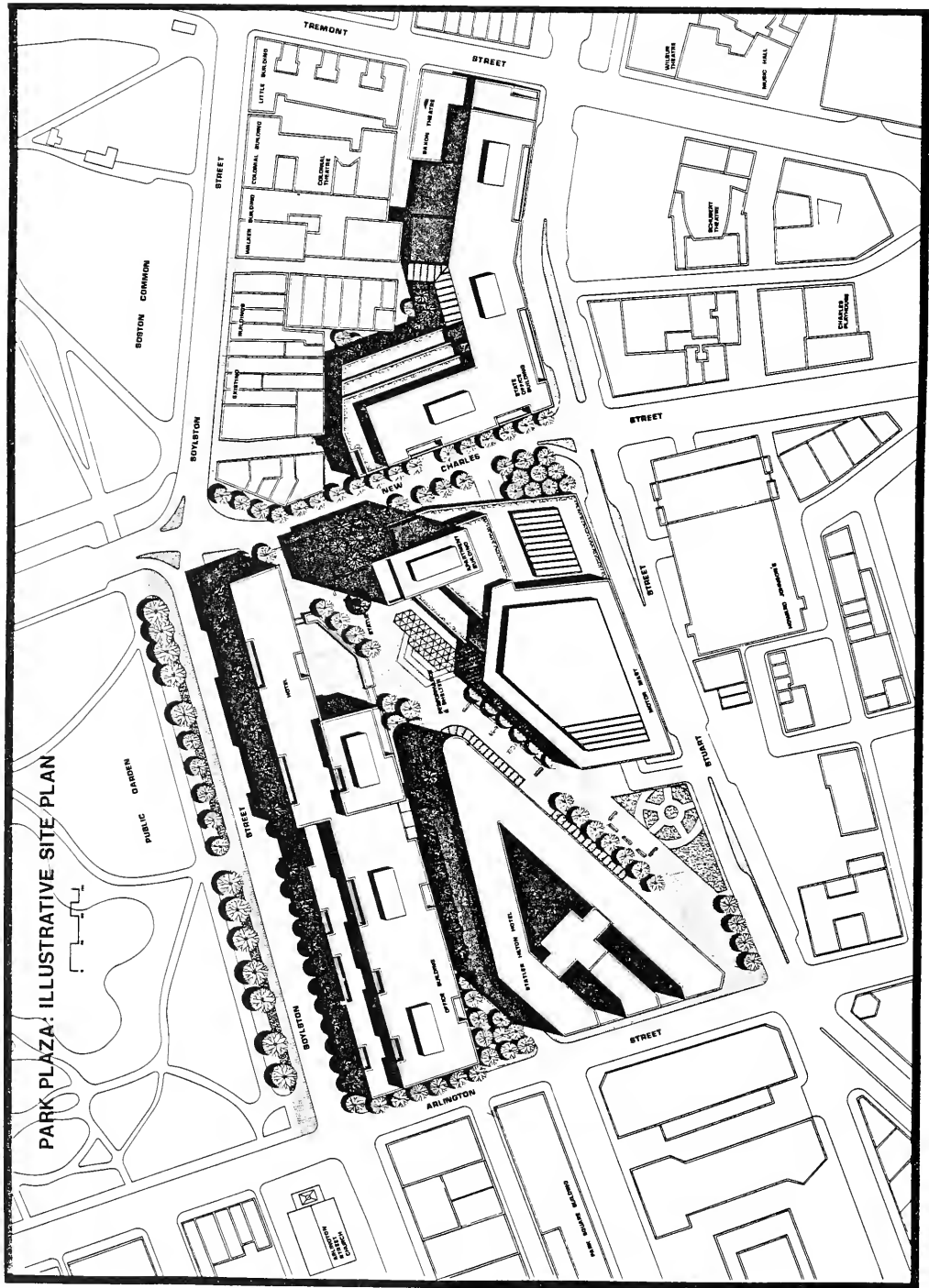


Fig. 2. ILLUSTRATIVE SITE PLAN

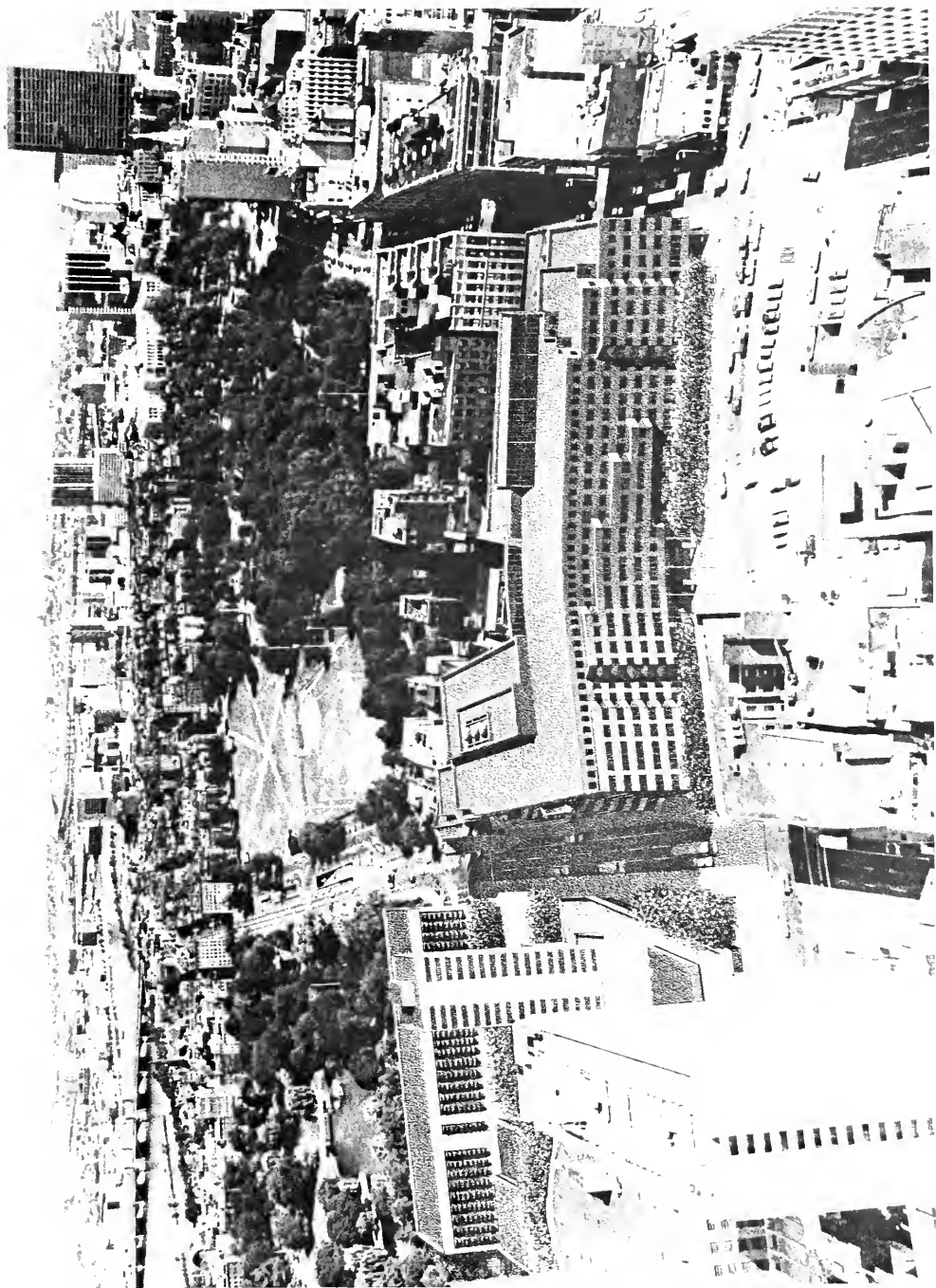
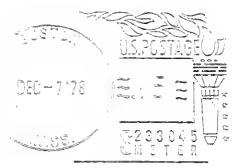


Fig. 3. PHOTOGRAPH SHOWING MODELS OF PROPOSED BUILDINGS



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